

**Op-ed**  
**Is Your School Prepared?**  
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We as individuals and as a community function everyday on some basic assumptions. We expect for example that when driving and we have a green light, that other people with a red light will stop their cars. This is an appropriate assumption to make.

However, you may be making a terrible mistake in assuming that the school your child, grandchild, niece, nephew, or neighbor child attends is doing everything possible to protect and care for your loved ones, during or after an act of violence or a disaster. There are over 230,000 students who attend school here in King County. This is a significant part of our population that is entrusted to others each day for their personal care. To say that every school is not prepared would be an over statement. There are "Islands of Preparedness" within the larger school community. Typically you will find elementary schools will be the best prepared, with junior highs and senior highs having decreasing levels of disaster preparedness. Recently we convened a meeting of knowledgeable people to informally assess the level of preparedness of our King County Schools. On a scale of 1-10 the highest average rating was a 5, over seven different categories.

Now you may be asking the question "why aren't my children's schools prepared?" There are several reasons. One primary reason is that we have been incredibly fortunate across this country. Some disasters provide enough warning to take protective measures. Others like tornadoes and earthquakes have not struck while schools are in session. The glass shards from imploded windows that were found stuck in student desks following the Northridge, California earthquake would have had much more tragic consequences if students were present in the classroom. It's not in the news, so we snooze! Secondly, state laws and codes on school preparedness are totally inadequate and basically only mandate evacuation drills. Thirdly, schoolteachers and administrators are being besieged with other mandates for either social or academic programs and initiatives. They cannot accomplish everything that they are being asked to do. Lastly, you personally are responsible for the lack of school preparedness. If adults with a stake in their children's safety do not become involved by demanding that their school district, school and classroom are made to be havens of safety for our children, then you bear a portion of the responsibility.

Perhaps you are now motivated to find out what level of planning and preparedness are being accomplished in your child's school. Here are some basic questions to ask your school administrators and things to look for. Ask to see a copy of the school's "All Hazard Emergency Management Plan". Most schools will have some form of plan. These plans should include procedures for dealing with incidents involving violence against staff and students. Inquire as to

what it says about: Caring for injured students; staff caring for students if parents are unable to pick up their children; sheltering in place in case of hazardous material spills; where do children go once they've evacuated the building? The next question is key, "When was the last time the plan was exercised? Note: Fire drills don't count! Who is responsible for keeping the plan updated, and staff trained on its contents? Will your school participate in the April 30th "Drop, Cover and Hold Drill?" What plans does the school have to participate in the region wide "Sound Shake 98" earthquake exercise scheduled for September 22, 1998?

You can also make your own assessment of the situation at your local schools. Are there any major highways, rail lines, or facilities that use extremely hazardous materials within a mile of the school (your local fire department can answer the last question about facilities)? Do you see unsecured overhead hazards like TVs, storage boxes or computers that can fall and injure people? Are library bookcases and file cabinets fastened to the wall, floor or ganged together? Does your child have a "comfort kit" with a snack, pictures and other items stored at the school? Becoming prepared for disasters involves more than this short listing, but it is a start.

One day our luck will run out and a disaster will strike our region when schools are in session. The measure of our preparedness then will be determined by what you do now. April is disaster Preparedness Month here in Washington State. The theme is, "Prepare...Because You Care!" I can not say it better.